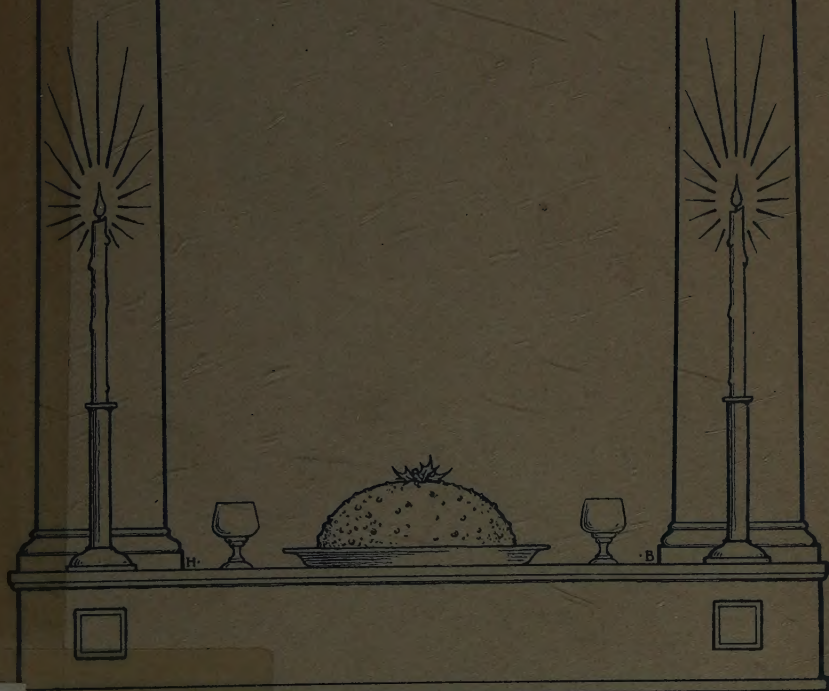
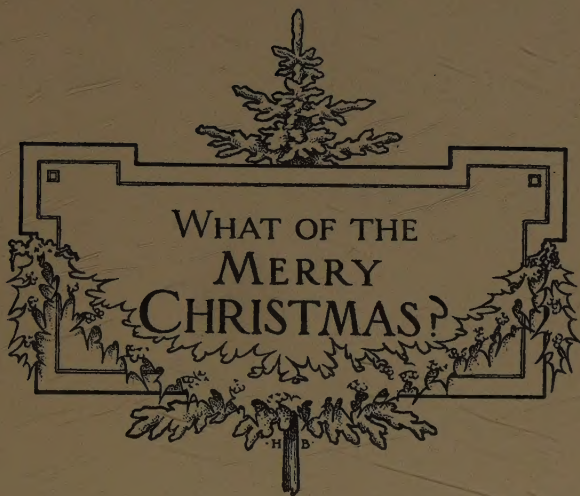


What
of the
Merry Christmas?

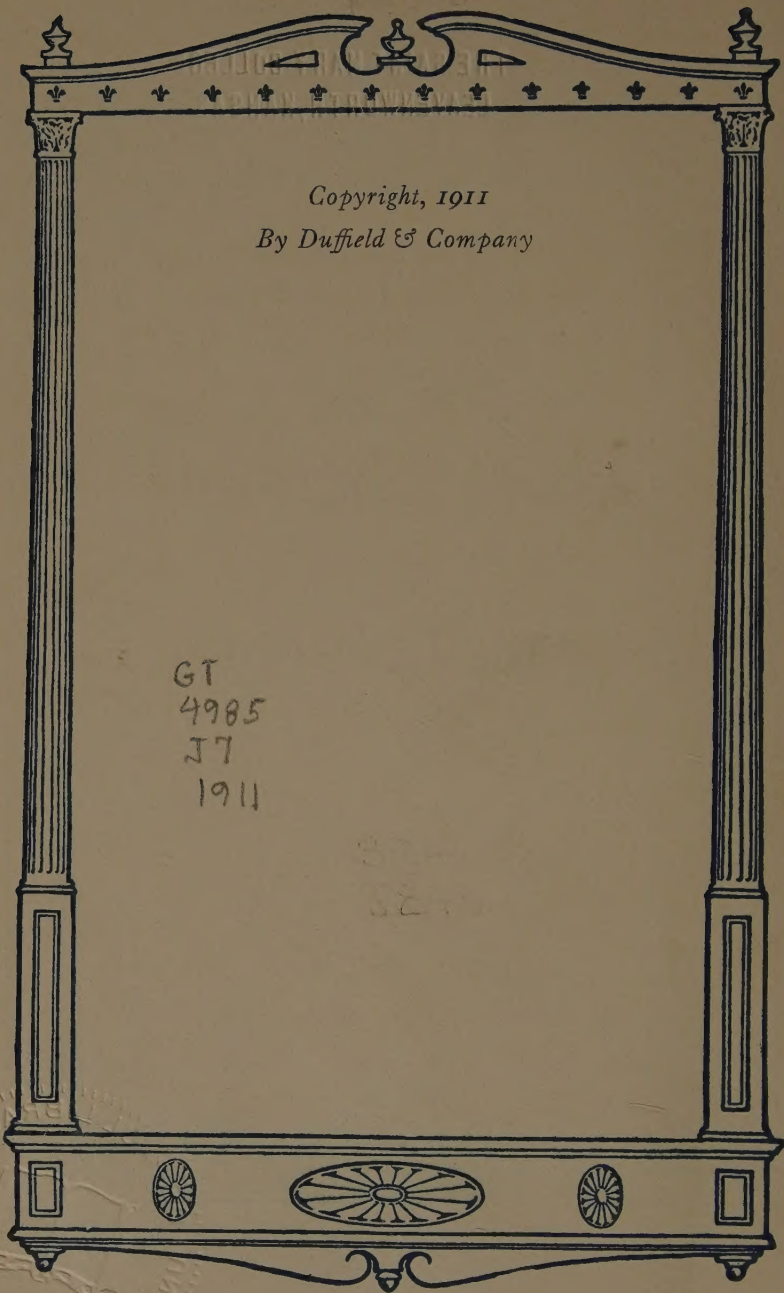




What
of the
Merry Christmas?

By
Jane Ellis Joy

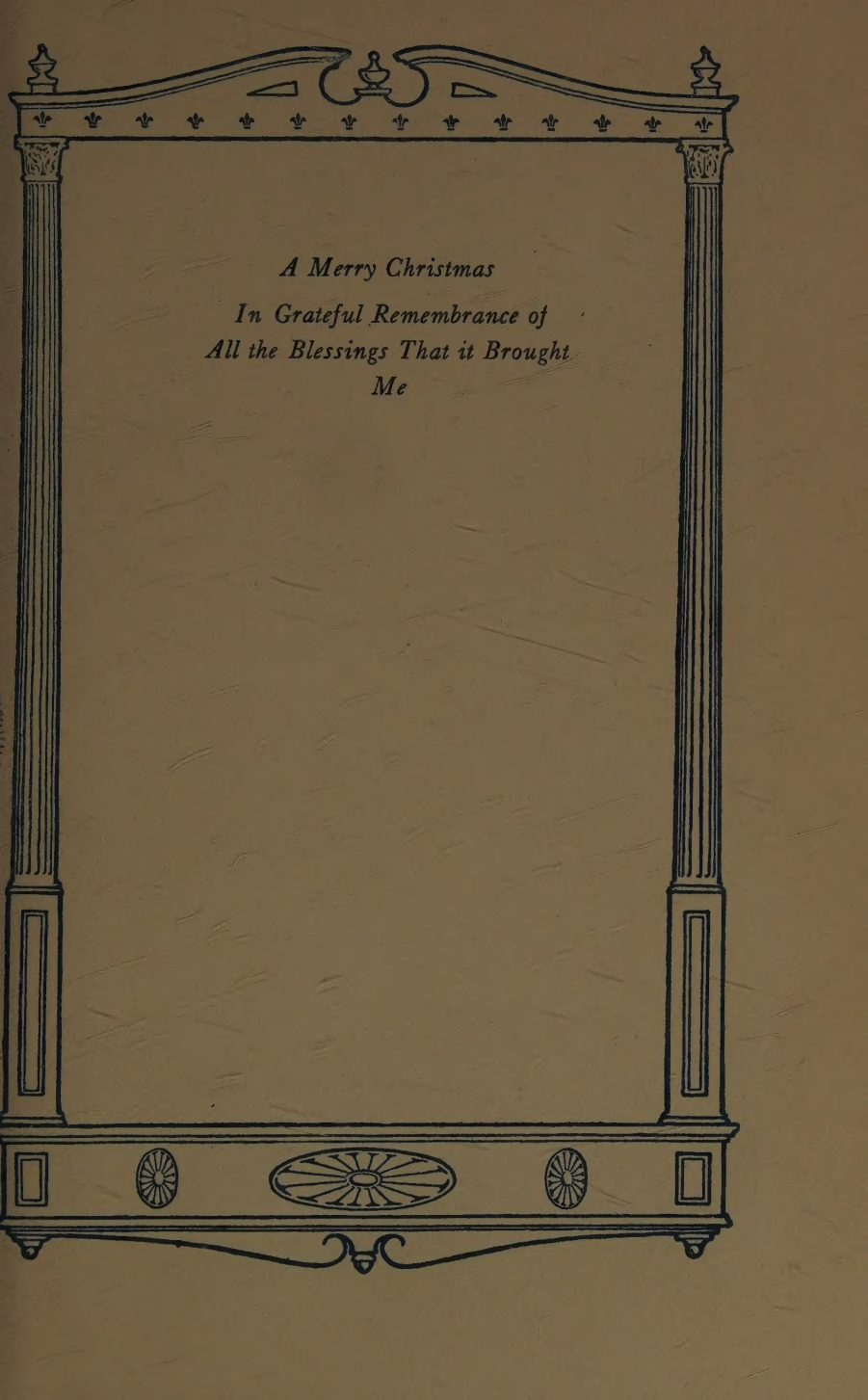
NEW YORK
DUFFIELD & CO.
1911



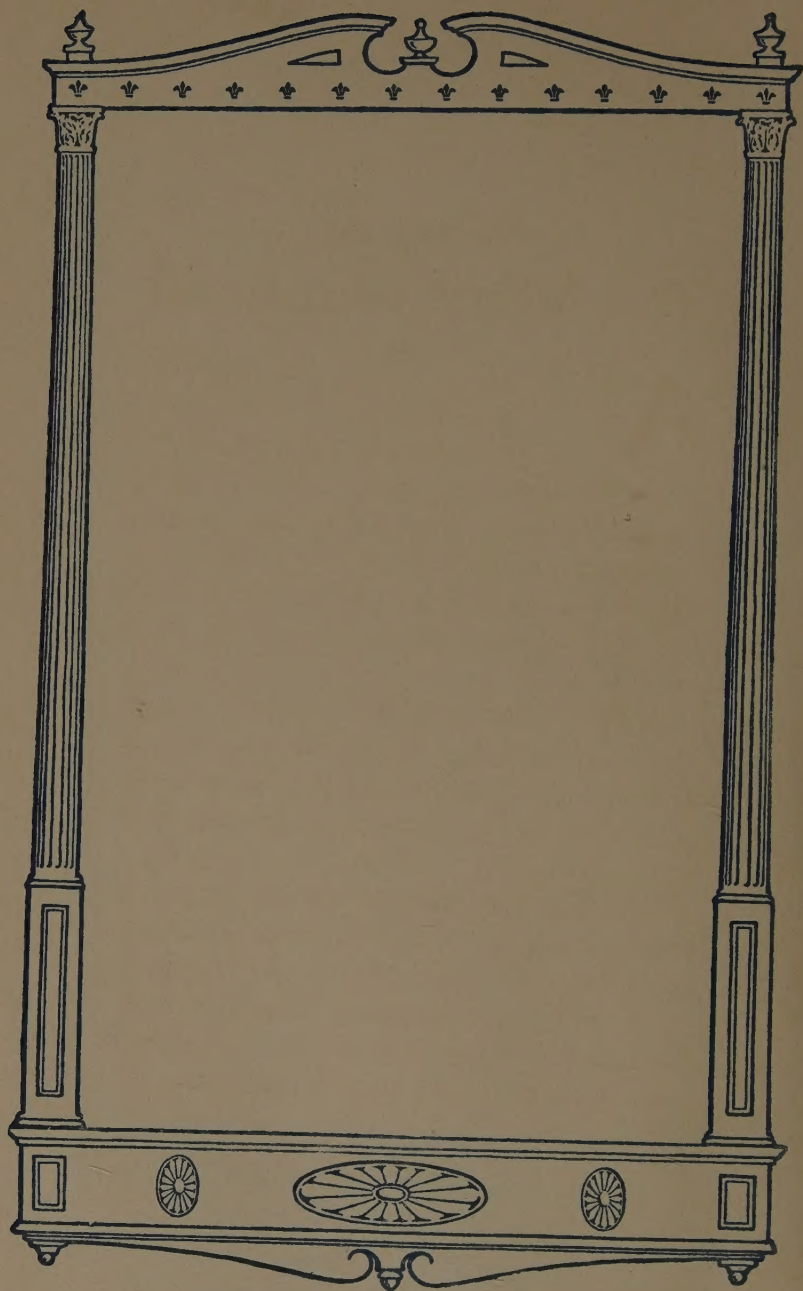
Copyright, 1911
By Duffield & Company

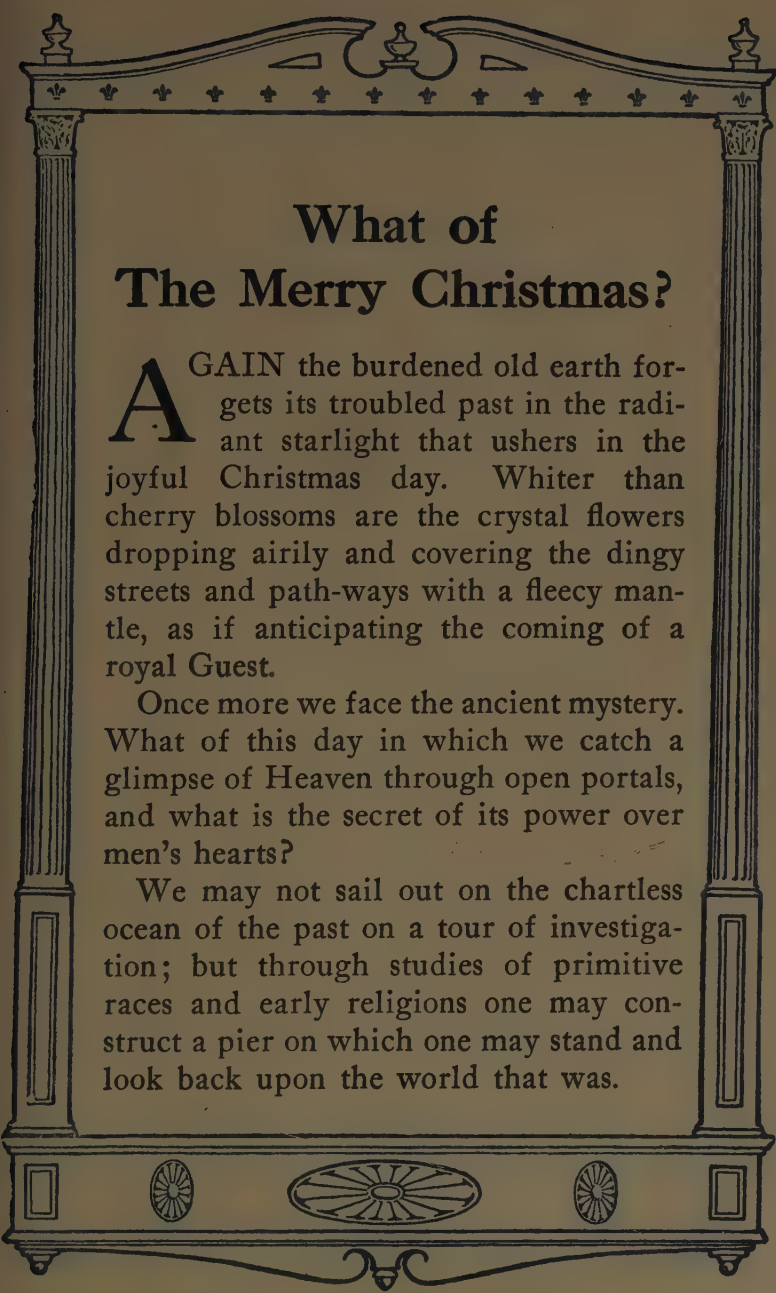
GT
4985
J7
1911





A Merry Christmas
In Grateful Remembrance of
All the Blessings That it Brought
Me





What of The Merry Christmas?

A GAIN the burdened old earth forgets its troubled past in the radiant starlight that ushers in the joyful Christmas day. Whiter than cherry blossoms are the crystal flowers dropping airily and covering the dingy streets and path-ways with a fleecy mantle, as if anticipating the coming of a royal Guest.

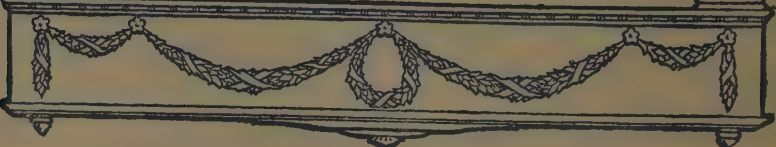
Once more we face the ancient mystery. What of this day in which we catch a glimpse of Heaven through open portals, and what is the secret of its power over men's hearts?

We may not sail out on the chartless ocean of the past on a tour of investigation; but through studies of primitive races and early religions one may construct a pier on which one may stand and look back upon the world that was.



Man has become man through discovering that he is allied somehow to a higher power on whom he is dependent. A child is born. Whence came the soul of the new being? Death claims the strong. Where passes the breath that gave the man his identity among the living? Trees shed their leaves, and plant life dies with the decline of the sun, but with its return the world is made anew.

The race is in its infancy. As little children cannot comprehend an abstraction, neither can these childlike men. Energy must have for them not only a concrete, visible source, but a personality appealing to the senses. They realized that without the sun life on the earth could not continue, since plant life supports animal life. Therefore the sun is the sustainer of life. Just such an object of worship as men needed at that time,—just such an object as satisfied groping understandings and undeveloped spiritual natures was found in the source of light and heat, occasionally hiding behind the clouds, retiring into his “taber-

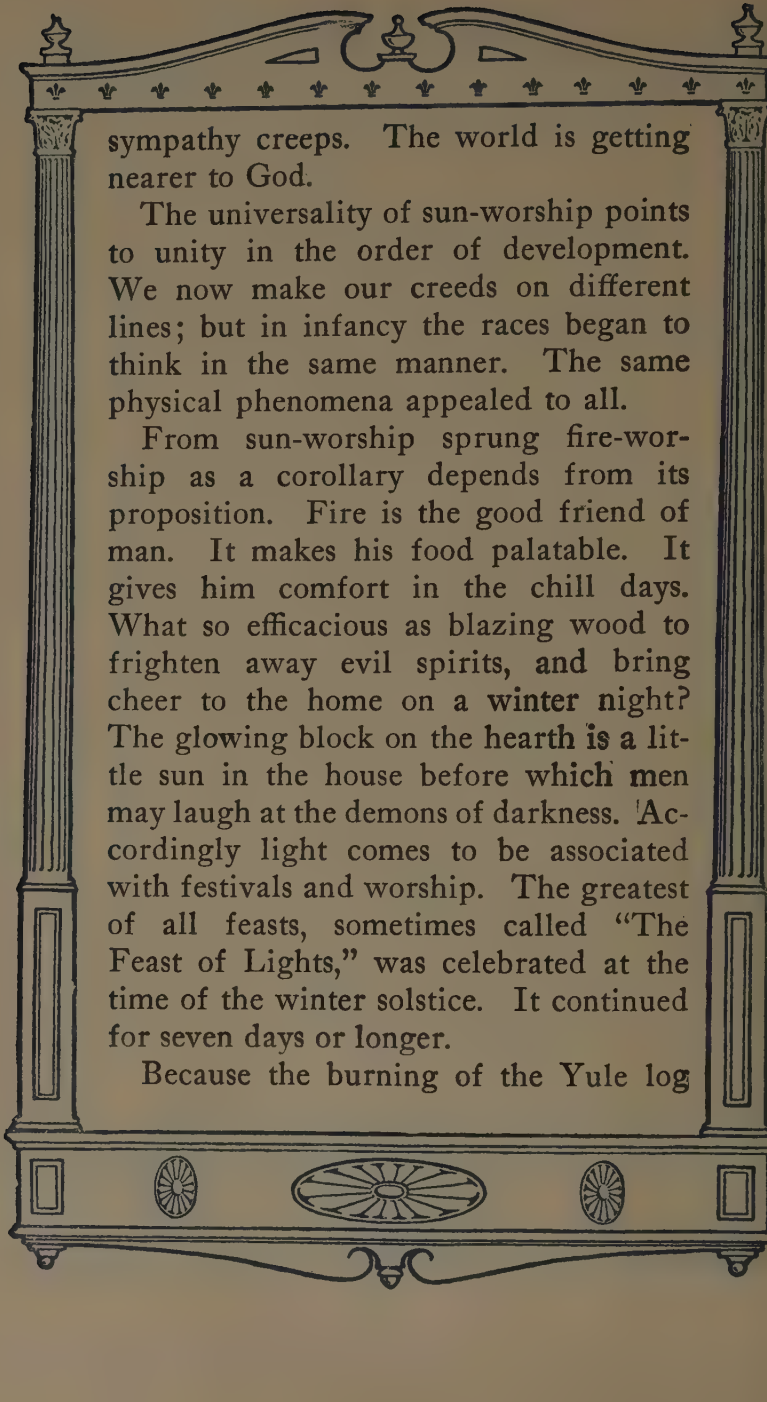




nacle" at night, and rising with the dawn; periodically going on a long journey northward, standing still for a few days during the latter part of December, and then, having conquered the Dragon of Darkness that held him captive during the solstice, reappearing a victor over death.

Commemorating the event, feasts were made, gifts were exchanged, and men made merry. To induce laughter, masters changed positions with their slaves; dignitaries stepped down from high offices, priests and sages gave their places to mimic fools and clowns. While wine was poured out to Bacchus, doubtless a good deal more of it went down the throats of the revelers, and there were wild scenes. Yet through it all runs the sap of a principle destined to nourish nobler ideals. Masquerading as a master the slave dreams of a time when he shall be a free man. In the guise of a menial the master recognizes his servant as a creature of kindred blood, and into his hard breast the softening influence of





sympathy creeps. The world is getting nearer to God.

The universality of sun-worship points to unity in the order of development. We now make our creeds on different lines; but in infancy the races began to think in the same manner. The same physical phenomena appealed to all.

From sun-worship sprung fire-worship as a corollary depends from its proposition. Fire is the good friend of man. It makes his food palatable. It gives him comfort in the chill days. What so efficacious as blazing wood to frighten away evil spirits, and bring cheer to the home on a winter night? The glowing block on the hearth is a little sun in the house before which men may laugh at the demons of darkness. 'Accordingly light comes to be associated with festivals and worship. The greatest of all feasts, sometimes called "The Feast of Lights," was celebrated at the time of the winter solstice. It continued for seven days or longer.

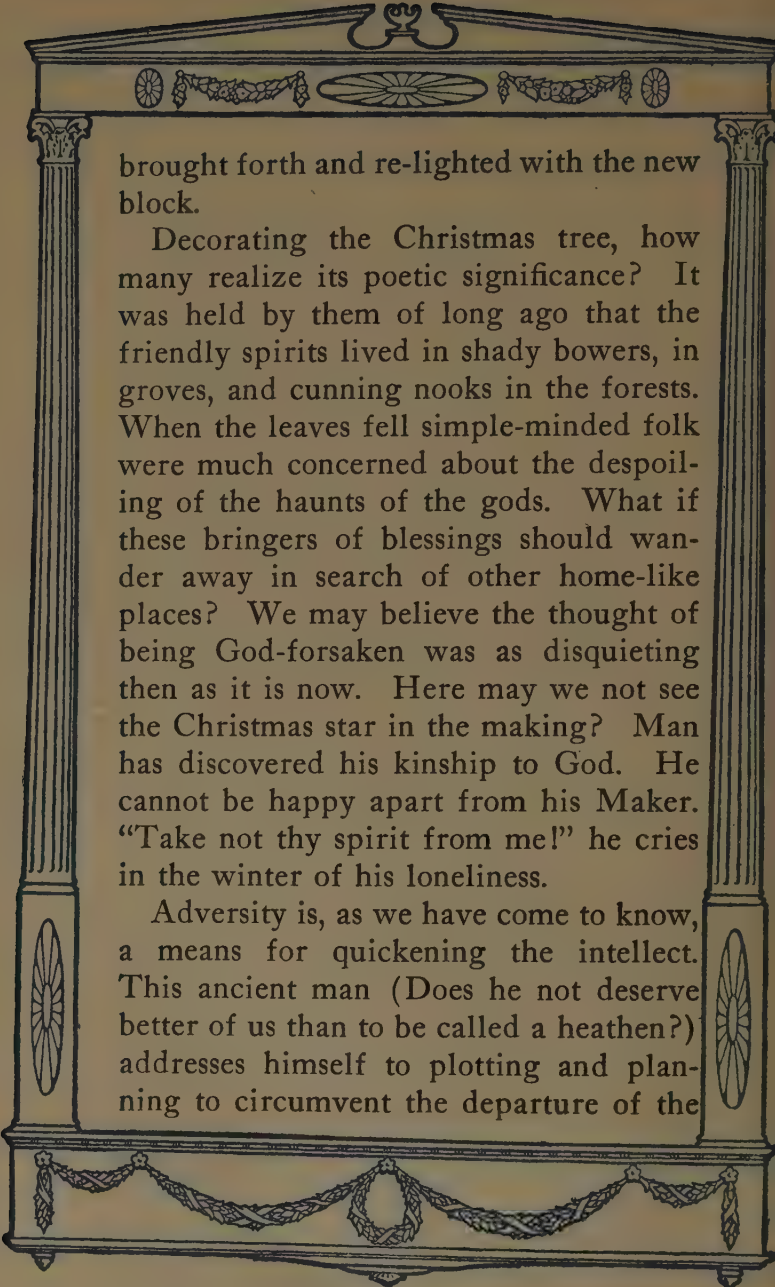
Because the burning of the Yule log



was incorporated into the Christmas festivities antiquarians have been at much pains investigating the ancient custom which prevailed throughout North-western Europe. In his "Northern Antiquities" Mallet says: "All the Celtic nations have been accustomed to worship the sun, either as Thor or his symbol." Having alluded to the merry celebration of the winter solstice, this author adds: "The festival was called in many places Yole or Yuul, which word means *sun*." Other authorities find in the root of the same word something that suggests a wheel. The sun was supposed to be a disk like the solid wheels of olden time, and like a wheel it was thought to turn.

The Yule log was the large, central log in a fire of smaller ones. While it burned, servants enjoyed unusual liberties; ill feeling between members of families was suppressed, and gifts were exchanged. If a piece of the Yule log remained unconsumed in the morning, it was carefully preserved as a sacred object until the next Yule tide, when it would be

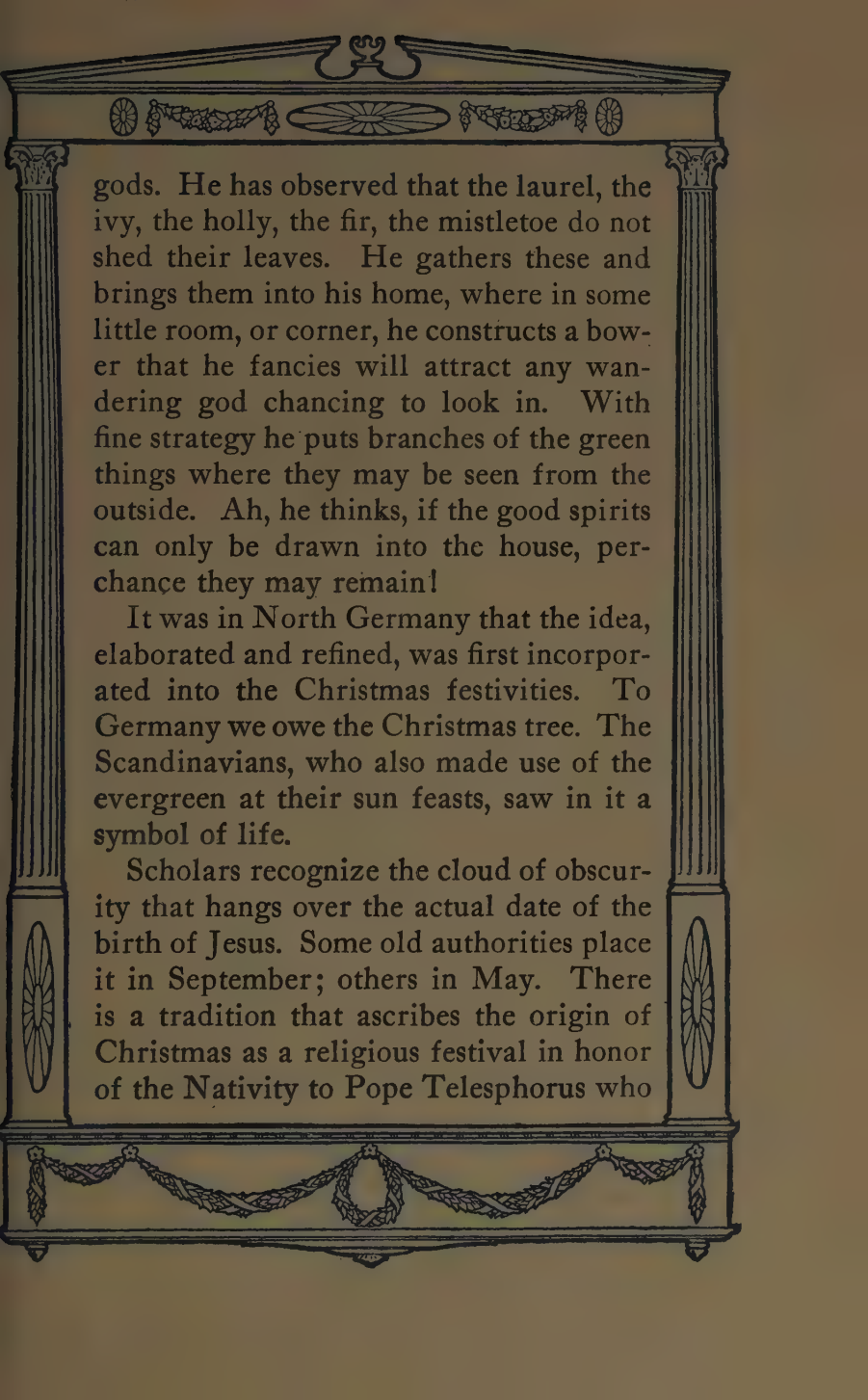




brought forth and re-lighted with the new block.

Decorating the Christmas tree, how many realize its poetic significance? It was held by them of long ago that the friendly spirits lived in shady bowers, in groves, and cunning nooks in the forests. When the leaves fell simple-minded folk were much concerned about the despoiling of the haunts of the gods. What if these bringers of blessings should wander away in search of other home-like places? We may believe the thought of being God-forsaken was as disquieting then as it is now. Here may we not see the Christmas star in the making? Man has discovered his kinship to God. He cannot be happy apart from his Maker. "Take not thy spirit from me!" he cries in the winter of his loneliness.

Adversity is, as we have come to know, a means for quickening the intellect. This ancient man (Does he not deserve better of us than to be called a heathen?) addresses himself to plotting and planning to circumvent the departure of the



gods. He has observed that the laurel, the ivy, the holly, the fir, the mistletoe do not shed their leaves. He gathers these and brings them into his home, where in some little room, or corner, he constructs a bower that he fancies will attract any wandering god chancing to look in. With fine strategy he puts branches of the green things where they may be seen from the outside. Ah, he thinks, if the good spirits can only be drawn into the house, perchance they may remain!

It was in North Germany that the idea, elaborated and refined, was first incorporated into the Christmas festivities. To Germany we owe the Christmas tree. The Scandinavians, who also made use of the evergreen at their sun feasts, saw in it a symbol of life.

Scholars recognize the cloud of obscurity that hangs over the actual date of the birth of Jesus. Some old authorities place it in September; others in May. There is a tradition that ascribes the origin of Christmas as a religious festival in honor of the Nativity to Pope Telesphorus who

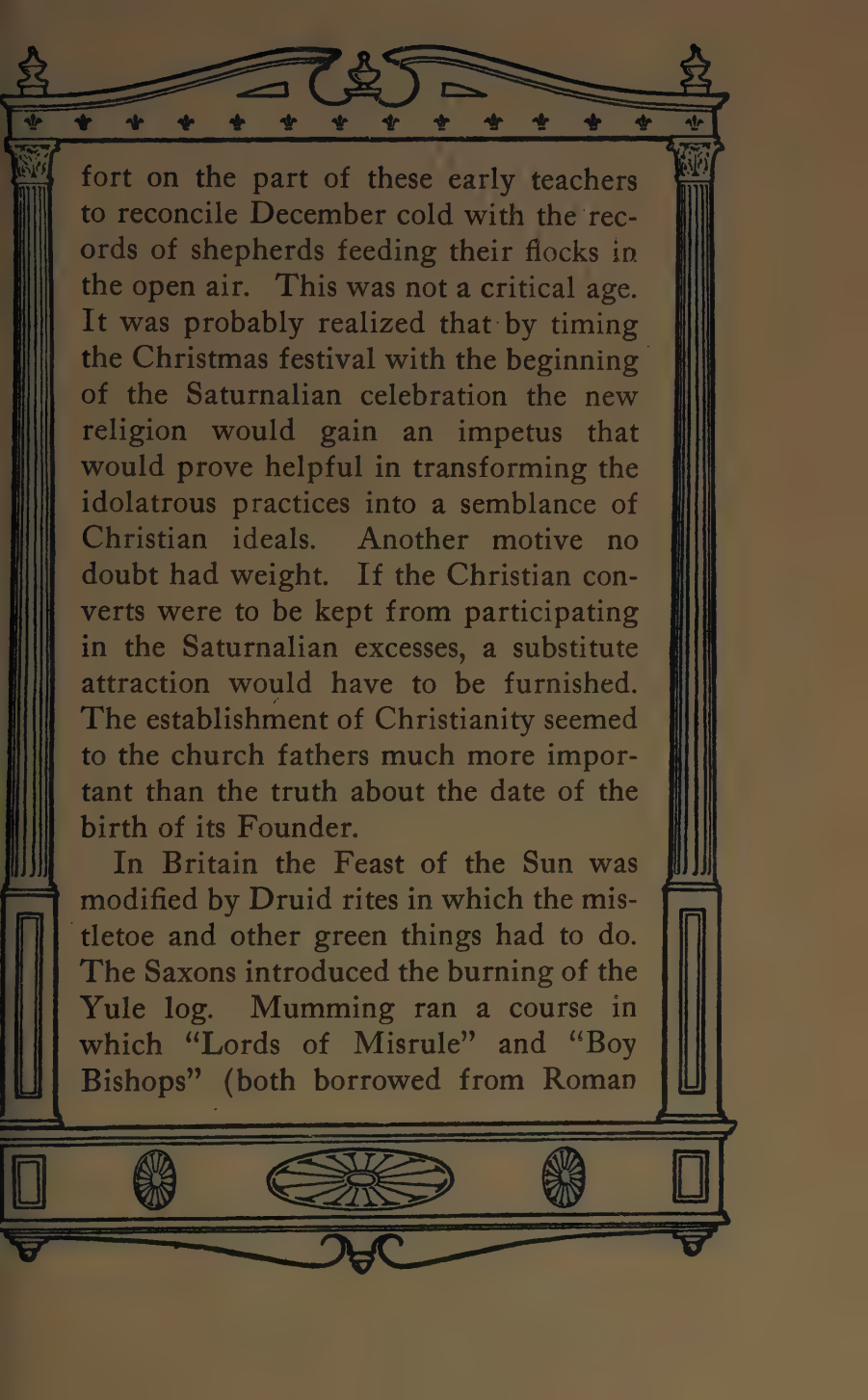


died 138 A.D. More critical historians, however, cite a sermon of Chrysostom, preached in 386 A.D., in which the church father alludes to the celebration of Christmas as a novelty, in proof of a later date. L'Estrange says: "The celebration of Christmas is as old as the time of Gregory Nazianzen and St. Basil." These worthies lived in the Fourth century. Chamber's "Book of Days" gives the time as the Fourth century.

Up to about the beginning of the Sixth century Christmas appears to have been a movable feast. The fixing of it on December 25th is said to have been the work of an abbot named Dionysius, who claimed to have discovered that Our Lord was born December 25th, in the Year of Rome 749. Dionysius died A.D. 545. From this time the religious significance of the day was emphasized. The celebration began on the evening of December 24th, when large candles were lighted not only in the churches but in the home of Christians.

Apparently there was little or no ef-

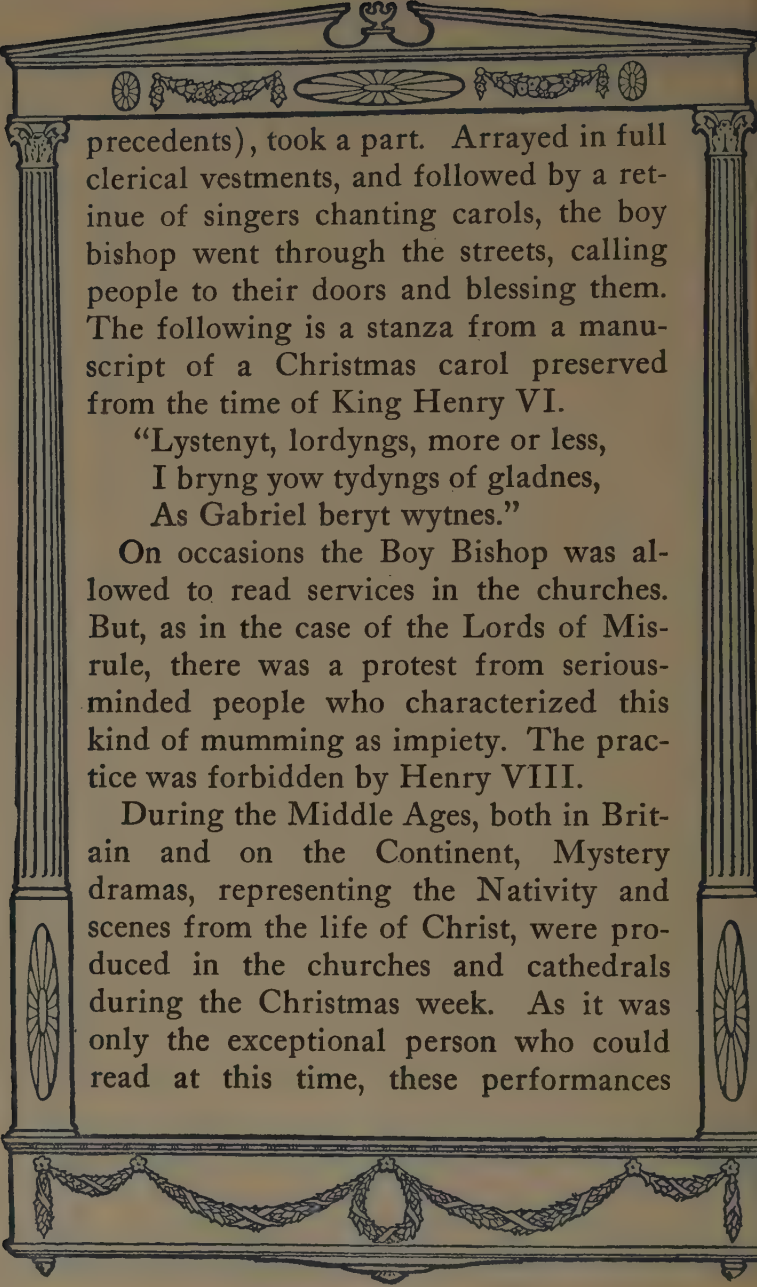




fort on the part of these early teachers to reconcile December cold with the records of shepherds feeding their flocks in the open air. This was not a critical age. It was probably realized that by timing the Christmas festival with the beginning of the Saturnalian celebration the new religion would gain an impetus that would prove helpful in transforming the idolatrous practices into a semblance of Christian ideals. Another motive no doubt had weight. If the Christian converts were to be kept from participating in the Saturnalian excesses, a substitute attraction would have to be furnished. The establishment of Christianity seemed to the church fathers much more important than the truth about the date of the birth of its Founder.

In Britain the Feast of the Sun was modified by Druid rites in which the mistletoe and other green things had to do. The Saxons introduced the burning of the Yule log. Mumming ran a course in which "Lords of Misrule" and "Boy Bishops" (both borrowed from Roman





precedents), took a part. Arrayed in full clerical vestments, and followed by a retinue of singers chanting carols, the boy bishop went through the streets, calling people to their doors and blessing them. The following is a stanza from a manuscript of a Christmas carol preserved from the time of King Henry VI.

“Lystenyt, lordyngs, more or less,
I bryng yow tydyngs of gladnes,
As Gabriel beryt wytnes.”

On occasions the Boy Bishop was allowed to read services in the churches. But, as in the case of the Lords of Misrule, there was a protest from serious-minded people who characterized this kind of mumming as impiety. The practice was forbidden by Henry VIII.

During the Middle Ages, both in Britain and on the Continent, Mystery dramas, representing the Nativity and scenes from the life of Christ, were produced in the churches and cathedrals during the Christmas week. As it was only the exceptional person who could read at this time, these performances

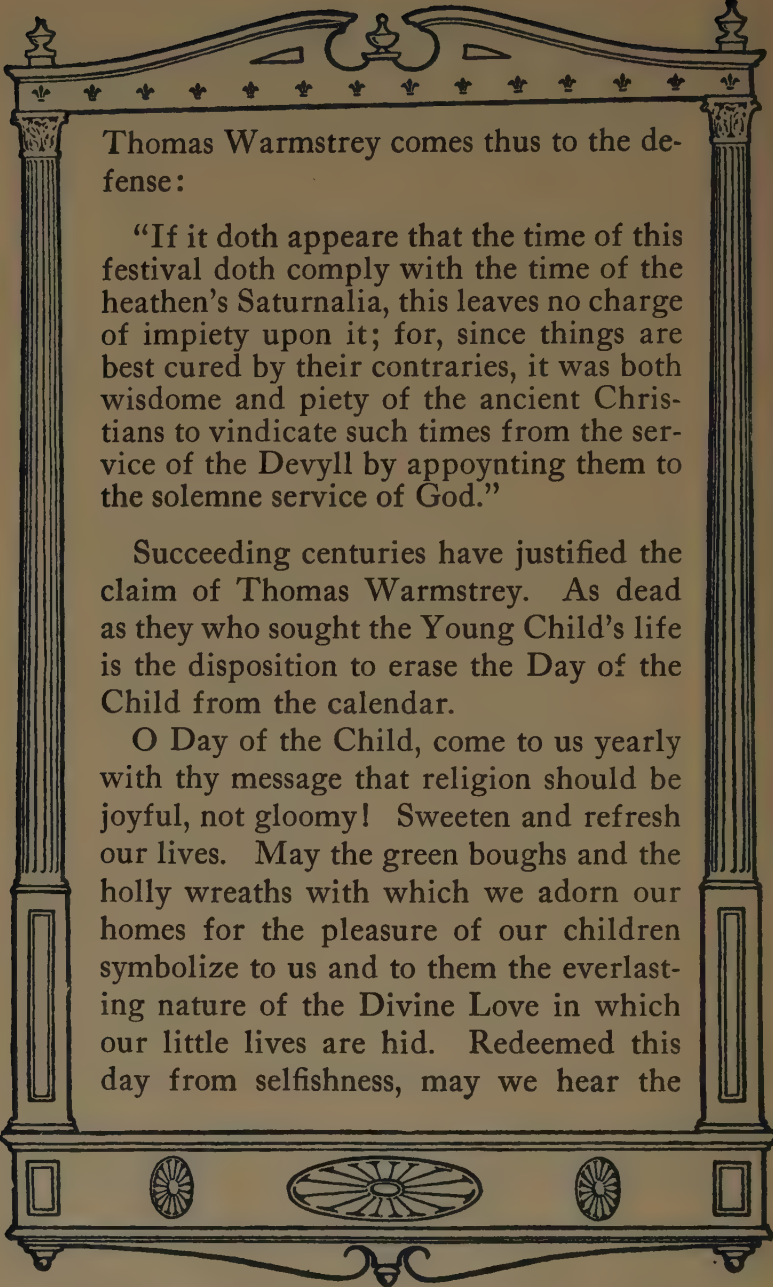


served to keep early Christian history fresh in men's minds.

As a natural contribution to the Christmastide came the influence of St. Nicholas, patron saint of virgins, and friend of youth, whose day was December 6th, and who gave presents to good children, slipping the gifts slyly into empty shoes and stockings in the dead of night. Santa Claus and Kris Kringle would appear to be closely related to Saint Nicholas,—possibly the same friendly genius having prompted all to do works of kindness. In his history of Great Britain Andrews mentions the Christmas street pageant of early times, in which “An old man hung round with savory dainties” was a feature.

From time to time Christmas practices have been regarded with scant favor by some sincere people who thought they saw in them “relics of heathenism.” The revolt against the day reached its height in Great Britain during the years of the Commonwealth, when public business was ordered to be transacted on December 25th. In a tract published in 1648



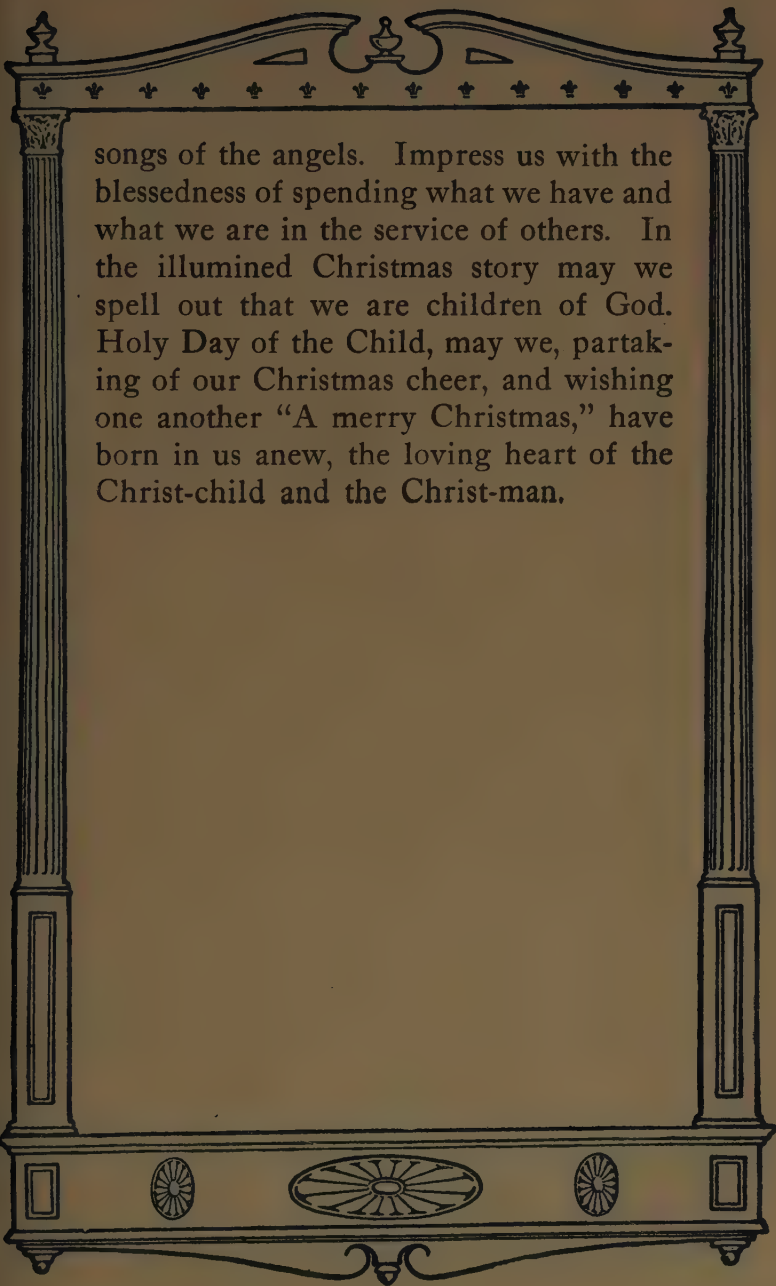


Thomas Warmstrey comes thus to the defense:

"If it doth appeare that the time of this festival doth comply with the time of the heathen's Saturnalia, this leaves no charge of impiety upon it; for, since things are best cured by their contraries, it was both wisdom and piety of the ancient Christians to vindicate such times from the service of the Devyll by appoynting them to the solemne service of God."

Succeeding centuries have justified the claim of Thomas Warmstrey. As dead as they who sought the Young Child's life is the disposition to erase the Day of the Child from the calendar.

O Day of the Child, come to us yearly with thy message that religion should be joyful, not gloomy! Sweeten and refresh our lives. May the green boughs and the holly wreaths with which we adorn our homes for the pleasure of our children symbolize to us and to them the everlasting nature of the Divine Love in which our little lives are hid. Redeemed this day from selfishness, may we hear the



songs of the angels. Impress us with the blessedness of spending what we have and what we are in the service of others. In the illumined Christmas story may we spell out that we are children of God. Holy Day of the Child, may we, partaking of our Christmas cheer, and wishing one another "A merry Christmas," have born in us anew, the loving heart of the Christ-child and the Christ-man.

[illegible]

The Library Store #47-0152

June
30



161704

De Paul Library, University of Saint Mar.
Leavenworth, Kansas 66048

394
J843

pam 406

P2-ACD-812